

STATEMENT

by

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Internal Member of the Scientific Jury according to Order No. R-4494/06.08.2026 for the official procedure for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy" (PhD).

Professional field: 7.4. Public Health

Scientific Specialty: Health Care Management

PhD student: Zlatina Ivanova Nikolova-Rancheva

Form of doctoral studies: Independent PhD student at the Department of Midwifery Cares, Faculty of Public Health, Medical University of Plovdiv

Topic: "Medical and Social Aspects and Expected Effects of Caesarean Section on Maternal Request"

Supervisors: : Assoc. Prof. Milena Sandeva, PhD, and Assoc. Prof. Nikoleta Parahuleva-Rogacheva, MD, PhD

The submitted set of materials in electronic format complies with the requirements for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", pursuant to the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB) and the Regulations of the Medical University of Plovdiv.

Brief Biographical Information about the PhD Candidate

Zlatina Nikolova-Rancheva obtained her Bachelor's degree from the Medical University of Plovdiv in 2010, majoring in Midwifery. In 2012, she obtained a Master's degree in Health Care Management from the Faculty of Public Health, Medical University – Plovdiv. In 2014, she completed a second Master's degree in Preventive Pedagogy at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv. Since 2021, she has held an academic position as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Midwifery Care,

Faculty of Public Health, Medical University of Plovdiv. In 2023, she acquired a specialty in Hospital Hygiene, Prevention and Infection Control. She is proficient in English.

Relevance and Significance of the Topic

The dissertation addresses a topical and significant public health issue associated with the increasing rate of caesarean sections (CS) in recent years. In Bulgaria, an increasing proportion of births are delivered by CS. Whereas in the 1960s the rate in the country was approximately 2%, it currently approaches 50% of all deliveries.

There is no doubt that timely surgical intervention can substantially reduce maternal and neonatal mortality. However, statistical data indicate that CS is increasingly performed in the absence of clear obstetric indications, due to factors such as fear of vaginal birth, the desire to choose the date of delivery, and physicians' reluctance to assume responsibility for vaginal delivery, among others. These factors further contribute to the increasing proportion of CS, including in healthcare institutions where the decision to perform a CS may be influenced not only by medical considerations but also by financial, psychosocial, and other factors.

As with any surgical intervention, CS is associated with the risk of adverse outcomes. According to published evidence, complications and mortality following CS are approximately twice as high as those following vaginal delivery. These circumstances underscore the need for health authorities to promote policies aimed at reducing CS procedures performed in the absence of clear clinical indications.

In this context, the topic addressed in the dissertation is highly relevant and timely, which confirms the significance of the present research.

Content and Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation comprises 164 pages and is illustrated with 44 figures, 12 tables, and 3 appendices. The bibliography includes 242 references, of which 12 are in Cyrillic and 230 in Latin script. Assistant Professor Nikolova-Rancheva demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation through an extensive *literature review* of specialised scientific sources, the majority of which are

international publications. The review of the most common indications for CS is particularly thorough and professionally presented, including both its benefits and potential risks for the mother and the newborn. The analysis of the factors contributing to the increasing rate of CS is logical and evidence-based. Interventions implemented internationally to reduce the rate of CS are also described in detail. The literature review concludes with clearly formulated findings that provide convincing evidence of the relevance and practical need for the development of the present research.

The **main aim** and **research tasks**, as well as the **subject** and **object of the study**, **units of observation**, and **variables**, are logically defined. The highly precise selection of the **study participants** is particularly noteworthy and constitutes an important prerequisite for the successful achievement of the research objectives.

The **aim** of the dissertation is clearly formulated and corresponds directly to the problem addressed by the study.

With regard to the **methodology**, Assistant Professor Nikolova-Rancheva has combined a variety of empirical methods and data collection techniques appropriate to the formulated aim and research tasks. This demonstrates her solid theoretical knowledge and practical skills in applying appropriate methodological approaches to the analysis and assessment of the issues under investigation.

The **study** and **analysis of the results** are based on objective and reliable primary-source information obtained from official documentation from three Departments of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

The author conducted an original study encompassing several key aspects:

- trends and regional differences in caesarean section rates in Bulgaria were analysed over a five-year period (2019–2023);
- factors associated with the preferred mode of delivery were investigated;
- the indications for performing caesarean section were objectively assessed in a representative sample over a three-year period (2021–2023) in the city of Plovdiv;

- medical history data, medical factors, and the types of complications occurring among women undergoing elective and emergency caesarean sections were analysed and compared;
- potential factors associated with refusal of a trial of vaginal birth among the women included in the study were identified.

A significant contribution of the dissertation is the development of an intervention algorithm for women experiencing tokophobia, aimed at modifying attitudes and promoting a positive emotional experience of childbirth. The proposed algorithm may contribute to the development of effective strategies for addressing procedures that are not medically justified.

The analysis of the **results obtained** demonstrates that the high rate of caesarean sections in Bulgaria is maintained by a complex interaction of clinical, psychological, and behavioural factors. Previous caesarean section and the characteristics of labour are of primary importance, whereas sociodemographic characteristics do not appear to have a substantial influence on the choice of mode of delivery.

A strong association was established between the previous and current mode of delivery, as well as between personal childbirth experience and the formation of subsequent preferences. Although fear of vaginal birth is widespread, it does not constitute an independent factor determining the choice of caesarean section; more significant factors are pronounced negative attitudes and a categorical refusal of vaginal delivery.

The findings highlight the key role of physicians and midwives in supporting informed decision-making and substantiate the need for early identification and professional counselling of women at increased risk of an unjustified preference for operative delivery.

The **conclusions** drawn from the study and the analysis of the investigated issues are comprehensive and well substantiated. The formulated **recommendations** focus on establishing an integrated approach to reducing non-medically indicated caesarean sections through national policies, early identification and counselling of at-risk pregnant women, optimisation of clinical practice, implementation of multidisciplinary

interventions, and enhancement of healthcare professionals' competencies and communication skills.

The **abstract** has been prepared in accordance with the applicable requirements and provides an objective reflection of the research findings. Three full-text scientific publications related to the dissertation have been submitted, two of which list Zlatina Nikolova-Rancheva as first author.

Conclusion

The dissertation of Assistant Professor Zlatina Nikolova-Rancheva demonstrates a high level of professionalism in the conduct of the research. The comprehensive analysis of the findings and the contributions identified provide evidence of her in-depth understanding of the issues addressed in the dissertation.

The submitted materials and research findings comply with all requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Regulations for its Implementation, and the Regulations of the Medical University of Plovdiv. The dissertation demonstrates that Assistant Professor Zlatina Nikolova-Rancheva possesses profound theoretical knowledge and well-developed research skills in the scientific specialty Health Care Management.

In view of the scientific and practical merits of the dissertation, I hereby give my positive assessment of the research conducted, the dissertation abstract, the results obtained, and the scientific contributions. I recommend that the distinguished members of the Scientific Jury award Zlatina Nikolova-Rancheva the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 7.4. Public Health, field of higher education 7. Health Care and Sports.

October 01, 2026

Plovdiv


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(Prof. Desislava Bakova, PhD)

Заличено на основание
Чл.5 §1, б. "В" Регламент (ЕС)2016/679